

Lithuanian giant-killers corner Gorbachev

by James Blitz
Vilnius

IT was Gulliver in Lilliput. The giant from Moscow, where the cars are huge and the buildings gargantuan, stepped into Vilnius, which in the cold evening drizzle could pass for an English university town.

Its streets are not built to accommodate the trappings of late-20th-century Soviet power. "Look at those cars!" shouted a Lithuanian boy to his mate, pointing at the steel 231 limousines drawn up on Lenin Square.

It was easy for a giant like Mikhail Gorbachev to feel safe here on arrival — until he spotted 150,000 people massed on the central square, all chanting one impossible demand. By the time he left for home yesterday, he had been overwhelmed.

Suddenly the Lithuanian issue has been transformed. It is not "whether" this little republic can secede from the Soviet Union, simply "how?" "We need to develop a mechanism on how a republic can leave the Soviet Union," Gorbachev told factory workers on one of his forays. "We need to discuss a time frame for a republic leaving the Soviet Union, for transferring defence and communications." He talked about a new "federal structure" for the country — one in which republics could have greater autonomy from Moscow — and Gennady Gerasimov, his spokesman, mentioned divorce.

Although the militant Lithuanian nationalist leadership dismisses such talk as a "cheap lie", Gorbachev appears to mean what he says. A "divorce" has massive national and international implications. It has been one thing for Moscow to allow the states of Eastern Europe to reassert their sovereignty. It is another for Gorbachev even to contemplate breaking up the Soviet Union. But his compelling reason for doing so is clear enough.

Gorbachev's visit was provoked by the Lithuanian Communist party's decision to split from the Soviet Communist party in order to assert its nationalist credentials. But he did not come all the way from Moscow to harangue the local party leadership into reversing its decision.

What both he and the local nationalists have in their sights is the election to the regional government, the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet, on February 24. A majority in the

new government for Sajudis, the nationalist front, is a certain bet. "Once we have achieved a majority in parliament," said Bronius Kuznickas, a member of the Sajudis executive council, "we will raise the question of independence head on."

Gorbachev has reason to fear that the talking and demonstrating will turn to physical action in the spring. The local Supreme Soviet might decree that Soviet troops leave the country. It might call for the printing of Lithuania's own currency, or — like the rest of Eastern Europe — dismantle its border with the West. That would send the other Soviet republics into a tailspin of revolt and create a catastrophe for Moscow.

That is why Gorbachev has grasped the nettle now. In coming to Lithuania to discuss the issue in factories and streets he is trying to stem a crisis by starting a long seminar on secession. He hopes the promise of a legislated withdrawal from the Soviet Union is a carrot that would keep the new Lithuanian Supreme Soviet happy, and give him time to fend off catastrophe.

The policy should work. Travelling around the republic this week, Gorbachev and the large group of politburo and Central Committee colleagues he brought with him have found some evidence that the Lithuanians are ready to discuss and debate the independence issue rather than rush headlong into it.

How, Gorbachev must have asked himself in recent days, had he allowed himself to be cornered by such a tiny republic? Pyotr Zarev, an engineer at a factory in the centre of town, provided an answer. "Gorbachev has arrived to find that the train had already left the station. If he had come here a year ago, instead of making all those visits to Thatcher and Mitterrand, he would have been in a better position to deal with the most serious problem in his own country."

But, even in victory, the bells of Vilnius's 13th-century cathedral have not rung and Gediminas Street is not decked in celebratory bunting. Sajudis's leaders are cautious. Partly, it is because they have never felt independence was Moscow's gift to grant. Sajudis would rather that Gorbachev acknowledge Stalin's illegal annexation of the territory in 1940 and go home.

And what, they ask, does Soviet "federation" mean? "Gorbachev uses the word federation like he uses the



Formula for divorce: Gorbachev, watched by local party chiefs, arguing with Vilnius people about the need for legislated secession word perestroika," says Algimantas Cekuolis, a member of the Lithuanian Communist party Central Committee. "The word means everything to everybody, but no plan of action is actually outlined." Does he mean separate governments for the republics, or separate currencies or armies?

There is concern, too, at what the timescale for secession might turn out to be when the draft law is finally presented to the Supreme Soviet in Moscow.

In an address to the mostly ethnic Russian workers of a radio engineering factory in Vilnius, Yuri Maslyukov, a hardline member of Gorbachev's politburo, mentioned

the possibility of a five-year transition period to independence — an eternity as far as Sajudis is concerned. Ask any member of the Sajudis council when they expect independence to be declared and the answer is unequivocal: "This year."

Maslyukov also spoke of the

problems of ethnic Russian workers, who would need to be rehoused in the Russian republic if they wished, at Moscow's expense.

A possible referendum on secession, raised by Maslyukov, would be no obstacle in Lithuania because of its comparatively small minority of ethnic Russians. But in

neighbouring Estonia and Latvia, with the same ambition to secede, the Russians are far more numerous and a referendum might stop those republics making the break.

Even if the mechanism of secession is decided, problems remain for the Lithuanians themselves. On a cold morning in Vilnius, the thought of total isolation from the Soviet Union for a country of 3m people is an unsettling one. While Sajudis may demonstrate passionately for independence, its leaders also know that the region relies on cheap imports of oil and gas from Moscow.

These anxieties are reflected in the different opinions of the Sajudis leadership on what kind of independence they want. Algirdas Kauspedas:

"We want complete independence." Algimantas Cekuolis: "Either we will be part of a 'commonwealth of soviet republics' or part of an 'economic community' like the EC. If we don't get either of those two, then we will go for full independence."

Bronius Kuznickas: "We must have an economic treaty with the Soviet Union, because we can't live totally apart from them. They are our neighbours and we want as good relations as possible."

Only one group in Vilnius has been precise about its goals: the ethnic Russian minority, which forms about 7% of the population, does not want to leave the Soviet Union.

"What we want," said a factory worker after meeting Maslyukov, "is a straight yes or no from Moscow on independence, not shilly-shallying. If it's yes to independence, then at least we Russians can set about dealing with it. But all Gorbachev does is dither."

Gorbachev can shrug off such attacks. Shrewdly, by bringing a large number of Central Committee members with him, he has strengthened his defences. Faced with a barrage of criticism over the Lithuanian crisis last month, the Soviet leader appears to have replied: "Come out with me and see if you can find any solution to it." The critics could hardly refuse, and are now tied in to his policy.

As a result, Gorbachev's position will be reinforced rather than weakened at a crucial Central Committee meeting at the end of this month, where a secession strategy for Lithuania will be furiously debated.

But the long-term question is whether, having pushed Gorbachev this far, the Lithuanian nationalists buy his new secession plan or insist on a quicker exit from the Soviet Union. Perhaps Gorbachev's strongest card is the good-natured restraint of the Lithuanians.

However sudden the change of power in the rest of Eastern Europe may have been, the people in this republic are sticking to a slow, law-abiding revolution.